

THE QUEEN VICTORIA BUILDING 1898-1986



THE RESTORATION OF THE QUEEN VICTORIA BUILDING PROJECT TEAM

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MESSAGE BY THE RT. HON. THE LORD MAYOR ALDERMAN DOUGLAS W. SUTHERLAND, A.M.

It is with great pleasure that I introduce this booklet recording the history and restoration of the Queen Victoria Building. The text is an abstract from a publication to be released on completion of the project.

The City Council is proud of having initiated and then actively supported the project and its developer, Ipoh Garden Berhad, in this most courageous undertaking. This building is one of the largest Victorian



restorations of its kind in the world and will prove not only to be a fitting monument to the maturity of our City as it nears its bicentennial year but will also form a new focal point for our community.

The Council commends the endeavours of all those who have contributed to the project, particularly the professional and construction teams who are rapidly bringing this project to fruition.



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TEXT

PHOTO RESEARCH

ARCHITECTURAL ADVICE

DESIGN

PRODUCED BY JOHN WITZIG & COMPANY PTY. LTD.
FOR RICE & DAUBNEY, STEPHENSON & TURNER,
ARCHITECTS IN ASSOCIATION.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE FORTHCOMING SOCIAL
& ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE QUEEN VICTORIA
BUILDING TO BE PUBLISHED BY WELLINGTON
LANE PRESS.

JOHN SHAW

JOANNA COLLARD

GEORGE KRINGAS
& ROSS GARDNER

JOHN WITZIG



THE QVB: GASLIGHT TO SATELLITE

WHEN the Queen Victoria Building — a municipal market on the grand scale of a cathedral — was opened in a golden key ceremony on Thursday 21 July 1898, the Mayor of Sydney, Matthew Harris, declared: 'It may be truly said that we have here built for the future as well as the present.'

It was a deceptively simple statement, often forgotten in the following years. At first it seemed little more than the sort of copperplate cliché common enough in civic speeches. In fact, the Mayor's words were both cautionary and prophetic. The City Council had plunged into debt to construct the new municipal market for the century that was about to begin. The city fathers' faith in the future and in the Queen Victoria Building was tempered by expert advice that more than a generation would be needed for the building to acquire financial foundations as solid as its massive granite pillars. Mayor Harris proved to be prescient for an even longer period and the Queen Victoria Building proved indeed that it had been built to last.

After almost a century of changing fortunes, the building retained strength and style enough for a new start and a new role. Its foundations had been laid in the era of gaslight and hansom cabs. Its restoration and rebirth in 1986 as a retailing centre have been reported across the world by satellite.

In 1897 the building was named in honour of Queen Victoria on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee. The restoration is the most extensive of any major public building of the Victorian era anywhere. The underlying concept of this unique project was

initiated in 1976 by the Sydney architects Stephenson & Turner. In 1980 Ipoh Garden Berhad, represented by Mr Yap Lim Sen, assembled the team which went on to bid successfully for the project and the joint venture of Rice & Daubney, Stephenson & Turner was formed to provide the necessary architectural services.

The commercial enterprise inspired by those plans is unprecedented in style and scale. A \$75 million investment by Ipoh Garden Berhad has converted an acre of dusty history into a modern shopping centre. The architects have combined and complemented late nineteenth-century elegance and character with late twentieth-century economics and technology.

The distinctive designs of the Queen Victoria Building were and remain both sedate and spectacular — a combination of gallery, arcade and indoor boulevard within Romanesque facades topped by domes and glass roofs covering an entire city block. Unlike the Sydney Opera House, its construction (1893-98) and shape did not provoke controversy. But when completed, the vast building soon fell prey to financial and political troubles. Later, demolition was threatened on several occasions and vigorously resisted. The recurring debates about the building's future — and indeed the question of whether it would have a future at all — were noisy even by the standards of Sydney, a city that has always been vocal about its landmarks.

In summary, the Queen Victoria Building took five years to build, eighty years to diminish and three years to restore to —



Above: The site of the Queen Victoria Building, showing the George Street Markets in 1870. Twenty years before their demolition, the Markets show no sign of being 'miserable' or a 'disgrace' as they were to be later described by aldermanic critics.

Photograph N.S.W. Government Printer.



Left: A beach scene at San Souci around the time of the construction of the QVB. The people of Sydney sought relief from the hot summer days on the beach — but fully clothed.

Photograph John Paine: Collection McLeay Museum.



Architect George McRae's perspective of the New City Markets from York and Market Streets. His original drawings (still on file in the Sydney Town Hall) were on fine starch-impregnated linen. The drawings were made in 'Chinese' or 'Indian' ink with ruling pens.

Council of the City of Sydney.



The clustered domes of the newly completed Queen Victoria Markets Building, 1898. The majestic main dome was clad with copper sheeting. Its lantern and cupola were fabricated in copper imitating masonry. The twenty lesser domes, made from pressed 'Muntz Metal', simulated stone-tiled Byzantine church domes.

Photograph Mitchell Library.



The finished interior 1898 showing the ground floor promenade known as the Avenue, the two gallery levels, and the glazed barrel vault roof.

Photograph Mitchell Library.

The York Street facade of the Building in the early 1900s. The cast iron posted awning was later replaced by a cantilevered awning.

Photograph Mitchell Library.



and beyond — its former glory. The archives show that the QVB was created by a grand municipal gesture, then vandalised by bureaucrats, threatened by political tides, defended by public outcry, reprimed by civic wisdom and finally given new life by private enterprise.

The decades of disputes about its fate embroiled politicians, architects, developers, citizens and conservationists. Eventually their arguments produced democratic agreement commanding wide public and financial support. Exactly 90 years after the City Council had decided to build 'the George Street New Markets' — at a cost of 261,102 pounds 10 shillings and 9 pence — the Council of 1982 decided to lease the landmark for 99 years to Ipoh Garden Berhad for renovation and revival. The decision, said the *Sydney Morning Herald*, would 'restore an important part of Sydney's architectural heritage'.

When this part of the national estate was built in 1893-98 the country was not yet a nation. Federation, which in 1901 united six of Queen Victoria's colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia was still a few years away. The great political warriors of this period of rising Australian nationalism were Alfred Deakin, Edmund Barton and Henry Parkes. Their speeches in the Federation campaigns were being reported and supported by Sydney's leading editor J. F. Archibald, who had founded the *Bulletin* a few years earlier. In the year that construction of the QVB began, *Bulletin* contributors included Henry Lawson, A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson, and Harry 'The Breaker' Morant. Also

active in Sydney at that time were Australia's finest painters, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton. The *Bulletin* called Streeton 'the Australian high priest of the impressionist craze' in reviewing his paintings of Sydney's harbour and beaches. In 1894 Sir Henry Parkes reluctantly took time off from politics to sit for a portrait 'for the cause of art and Tom Roberts'.

In Sydney that year, two other artists were in the making: schoolboy batsmen named M. A. Noble and Victor Trumper scored 152 and 67 respectively in their first game for New South Wales. Sydney rode out to the cricket, and to the racecourse at Randwick, which was installing the new-fangled 'starting machines', on steam trams. As they hissed and clanged along George Street, their open top decks gave passengers grandstand views of excavations for the QVB. Often the trams were held up by horse-drawn waggons hauling away endless loads of clay and sandstone. The building was making its first marks on Sydney.

Labourers were paid 5 shillings a day for the pick and shovel work and the jobs were eagerly sought because the city (population: 450,000) was struggling to emerge from recession. The QVB was a tangible symbol of confidence in recovery. After a run on some banks, credit was flowing again and in 1893 the City Council had little difficulty in borrowing 300,000 pounds (the equivalent by some measures of \$30 million in the 1980s) to finance its decision to replace the old George Street markets. These ramshackle relics of early Sydney had been patched together between 1831 and 1869 near George Street. By 1888 this warren of stalls, sheds and roofed



A long way from Home. A Squaw of a Vanishing Race
selects a SINGER SEWING MACHINE at SINGER
SHOP, Queen Victoria Building, Corner George & Market St Sydney, N.S.W.
11 August, 1926.

The interior of the Singer Sewing Machine shop
showing the elaborate Wunderlich pressed metal tiles
on the walls.

Photograph Singer.



In 1918 the gracious internal spaces began to disappear. Here workmen are installing metal frames to support a leadlight ceiling over the ground floor during the radical 'remodelling' which eliminated the Avenue. The photo shows beams at upper levels carrying new galleries within the widths of the original voids, allowing shopfronts to be bought forward to increase rentable area.

Photograph Milton Kent: Council of the City of Sydney.

alleys selling meat, vegetables and livestock was being described by aldermen as 'miserable' and a 'disgrace to the metropolitan city of the Mother colony'. They could hardly overlook this affront to their civic pride: the dilapidated markets were within sight and smell of the Town Hall with its splendid new concert hall.

However, the Council's reasons for replacing the markets on such a grand scale were not clear. Its motives seemed mixed. In one sense, the QVB was built simply because an inviting central site was available; perhaps, like nature, municipal minds abhor a vacuum. Intercolonial rivalry was another factor. In 1880 Melbourne had opened its towered and domed Exhibition Building. Sydney's response, the steel and glass Garden Palace, burned down in 1882 — 'no one who saw it can the sight forget, nor history cease to pen it with regret', lamented a doggerel of the day.

Apparently the Council, determined to again think and build big, did little market research about demand for retail space in the city centre. Sydney's population had expanded almost tenfold in the previous forty years and, in the confident Victorian vision, growth was taken for granted. But the Council had already built new trading halls on the southern edge of the city and the 'downtown' population was known to be shrinking as new suburbs sprouted along the spreading tram and rail lines. And six private retail arcades, including the fashionable Strand Arcade, had been built in the previous decade.

Nevertheless, the Council hurried ahead in leap-frog

fashion. Based only on sketches by City Architect George McRae, excavations began in March 1893, five months before the Council had even decided on the design of what was to rise from the hole as big as two football fields between George and York Streets. During the digging, McRae was frantically drafting. The Council seemed determined to stay one jump ahead of him — invitations for tenders for the steel and iron superstructure were being written when McRae presented the Council with four alternative facades. A professional journal of the day described them as 'scholarly Renaissance', 'picturesque Queen Anne', 'classic Gothic', and 'American Romanesque'. The Council briskly selected the latter, a spectacular addition to Sydney's streetscape and skyline.

Five years later when the magnificent building opened for business, Council policies had produced a monument to civic energy and a chronic economic headache. The councillors proved far better builders than managers. They were advised that competitive rents would repay their investment in thirty years, but they sought quicker returns. The market basement, which the *Bulletin* derided as 'the biggest cabbage shop in town' attracted few produce merchants, despite novel elevators to carry their horses and carts down from street level. High rents also meant that there was no rush for the gallery and arcade shop spaces. The Australian-Chinese Mandarin merchant, Quong Tart, and such prestige clients as Penfold's Wines and the Singer Sewing Machine Company, took leases.

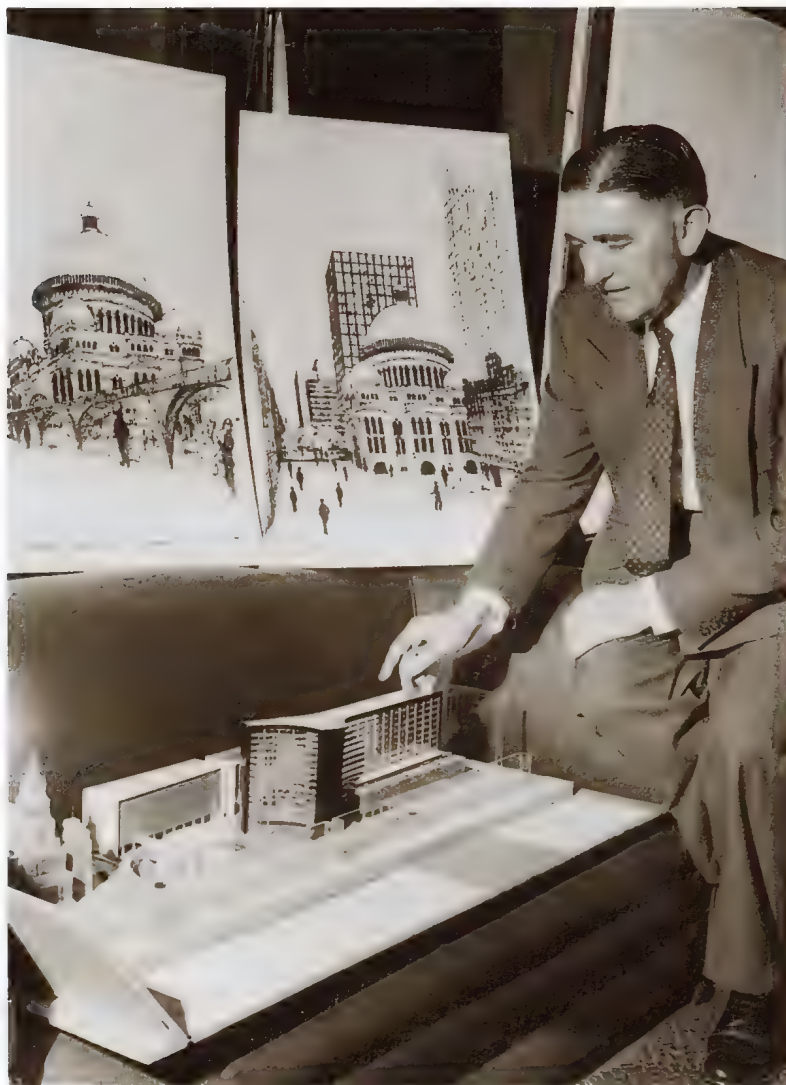
But before long Council was cutting, covering and cluttering



The removal of the original posted awning in June 1918. The Post and Telegraph Office occupied this position on the corner of York and Drutt Streets from 1902.

Photograph Council of the City of Sydney.





Opposite: In the 1930s the nineteenth century facade acquired a superb art deco feature when the Sydney County Council — the electrical authority for the city — moved in. During restoration the facade and interior were donated to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

Photograph Council of the City of Sydney.

Above: In 1959, the then Lord Mayor of Sydney, Alderman Harry Jensen, with a model of a proposal to replace the Queen Victoria Building. Also shown are sketches of other schemes which retain the central dome of the building but add incongruous tower blocks and street facades.

Photograph John Fairfax and Sons.



Scaffolding and hessian shroud the Victorian authority of the building during restoration. W.P. McIntosh's opulent sculptures in Carrara marble were installed above the main entrances in George and York Streets after the opening in 1898. The figures depicted Australia distributing honours to commerce and the arts.

Photograph Jenny Blain.

the stylish interiors in their search for sellable space. The City Library moved in, its readers lulled by the bouquet from Messrs Penfold's products in the basement. It was suggested that the whole place be sold to the new railway system tunnelling its way downtown. In 1916 an alderman offered to buy it. In 1934 the Council moved their offices into the building, and the Electricity Department smothered Victorian surfaces with art deco fittings. Gallery voids were converted over and the gracious glass barrel vaults were sealed. The mutilation continued with the insertion of clerical cubicles, car parking and air raid shelters. Victorian visions vanished under layers of ugly additions.

Oddly enough, the greatest affront to the desecrated building proved to be its salvation. In 1959 Alderman Harry Jensen, supported by several prominent architects, proposed it be demolished to make way for a city square with underground parking. For once Mr Jensen, a popular and competent Mayor, misread the temper of his city. A tug of war over the QVB had been shaping up for some years. An international hotel chain had considered building a 400-room hotel on the site. Another company offered to lease a hotel there if the City Council would build it. A group of Sydney businessmen offered to take a 21-year lease. The Electricity Department (which had become the County Council) was thinking of moving out. There was talk of moving in more civic offices. Alderman Jensen's radical plan had the virtue of stimulating serious debate. Sydney's postwar construction boom had begun and the shape and style of the city was in question.

Suddenly, architecture and the urban environment were public issues. In 1960 architect Robin Boyd published *The Australian Ugliness*, which brought heat as well as light to the debate. In the case of the QVB, the exchange of a neglected building — moored in midtown like an obsolete liner awaiting the breakers — for a brave new city plaza with gardens and fountains seemed an attractive bargain at first. But gradually awareness of history and heritage and the possibility of restoration pushed back the bulldozers. The QVB found friends after its wilderness years. Public meetings, letters to editors, the National Trust and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (NSW chapter) rallied support in the rescue campaign. They urged that the building be preserved but none had a credible suggestion for financing restoration. In 1969 a candidate in the Council elections said that if elected he would propose demolition. He was not elected.

In 1971 the first decade of debate ended when the Mayor, Alderman Emmet McDermott, announced that the QVB would be reprieved and restored. The actor-writer Barry Humphries saluted this decision with a poem praising the Council's 'wisdom and vision'. In 1973 another admirer, the Sydney novelist Ruth Park, wrote that 'one of the great sights' of Sydney was also 'one of the most argued-about, most-hated, and most-loved buildings' in the city. Another decade was to pass before an economically viable role was discovered for the QVB, one that would ensure that its future would be founded on something sounder than sentiment.



The top floor at the commencement of renovation in 1984 showing remnants of the 1930s alterations. The structure which supported the false ceiling under the barrel vault is evident, and the concrete infills of the gallery voids have yet to be removed. Sheets of corrugated iron which replaced the original glass have been removed to allow light to stream in.

Photograph Jenny Blain.

Following page: The interior nearing completion in March 1986.

Photograph John Witzig.



Throughout the 1970s, scores of proposals — for hotels, arts centres, apartments, casinos — were made by Australian and overseas groups. But only one, Stephenson & Turner's 1976 plan to restore the derelict building to its original use as a mixed retail centre met the requirements of the City Council, the Heritage Council, the National Trust and the community as a whole. The Town Clerk, Mr Leon Carter, said that what was wanted next was a 'wealthy visionary'.

In 1980 that essential element entered the QVB saga in the form of Ipoh Garden Berhad, a Malaysian public company with interests in Singapore, Hong Kong and the United States as well as Australia. (Ipoh's co-founder, Dato Tan Chin Nam, was well-

known in Australia as an owner of Think Big, winner of the Melbourne Cup in 1974 and 1975.) In 1980, seeking further opportunities in Australia, the Ipoh group with the support of the Council of the City of Sydney assembled the project team and instructed Rice & Daubney, Stephenson & Turner as joint architects to prepare the necessary designs.

In 1982 the City Council and Ipoh Garden Berhad agreed on a 99-year lease and profit-sharing contract. Since then the company has invested some \$75 million to turn back the clock to an elegant era and at the same time prepare the QVB to prosper far into a third century.

STEPHENSON & TURNER SYDNEY

The Directors of Stephenson & Turner
Sydney Pty Ltd
and
Innerspace Sydney Pty Ltd

request the pleasure of the company of

Mr Graham Miller and partner

**at a cocktail party
to celebrate our participation
in the restoration of the**

Queen Victoria Building

Friday 7 November 1986
6 pm - 8 pm

Entry via Main Arch
off George Street

RSVP 29 October 1986
Joanne 957 5500